

Classic Poetry Series

Carolyn Forché
- poems -

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Carolyn Forché(28 April, 1950 -)

Carolyn Forché is an American poet, editor, translator, and human rights advocate.

Life

Forché was born in Detroit, Michigan, on April 28, 1950, to Michael Joseph and Louise Nada Blackford Sidlosky. Forché earned a B.A. in International Relations at Michigan State University in 1972, and MFA at Bowling Green State University in 1975. She taught at a number of universities, including Bowling Green State University, Michigan State University, the University of Virginia, Skidmore College, Columbia University, San Diego State University and in the Master of Fine Arts program at George Mason University. She is now Director of the Lannan Center for Poetry and Poetics and holds the Lannan Chair in Poetry at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. She lives in Maryland with her husband, Harry Mattison, a photographer.

Career

Forché's first poetry collection, *Gathering the Tribes* (1976), won the Yale Series of Younger Poets Competition, leading to publication by Yale University Press. In 1977, she traveled to Spain to translate the work of Salvadoran-exiled poet Claribel Alegría. Upon her return, she received a Guggenheim Fellowship, which enabled her to travel to El Salvador, where she worked as a human rights advocate. Her second book, *The Country Between Us* (1981), was published with the help of Margaret Atwood. It received the Poetry Society of America's Alice Fay di Castagnola Award, and was also the Lamont Poetry Selection of the Academy of American Poets. She won the 2006 Robert Creeley Award.

Her articles and reviews have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Nation*, *Esquire*, *Mother Jones*, *Boston Review*, and others. Forché has held three fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, and in 1992 received a Lannan Foundation Literary Fellowship.

Her anthology, *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*, was published in 1993, and her third book of poetry, *The Angel of History* (1994), was chosen for *The Los Angeles Times* Book Award. Her works include the famed poem *The Colonel*. She is also a trustee for the Griffin Poetry Prize.

Though Forché is sometimes described as a political poet, she considers herself a

poet who is politically engaged. After first acquiring both fame and notoriety for her second volume of poems, *The Country Between Us*, she pointed out that this reputation rested on a limited number of poems describing what she personally had experienced in El Salvador during the Salvadoran Civil War. Her aesthetic is more one of rendered experience and at times of mysticism rather than one of ideology or agitprop. Forché is particularly interested in the effect of political trauma on the poet's use of language. The anthology *Against Forgetting* was intended to collect the work of poets who had endured the impress of extremity during the 20th century, whether through their engagements or force of circumstance. These experiences included warfare, military occupation, imprisonment, torture, forced exile, censorship, and house arrest. The anthology, composed of the work of one hundred and forty-five poets writing in English and translated from over thirty languages, begins with the Armenian Genocide and ends with the uprising of the pro-Democracy movement at Tiananmen Square. Although she was not guided in her selections by the political or ideological persuasions of the poets, Forché believes the sharing of painful experience to be radicalizing, returning the poet to an emphasis on community rather than the individual ego. In this she was strongly influenced by Terrence des Pres.

Forché is also influenced by her Slovak family background, particularly the life story of her grandmother, an immigrant whose family included a woman resistance fighter imprisoned during the Nazi occupation of former Czechoslovakia. Forché was raised Roman Catholic and religious themes are frequent in her work.

Among her translations are Mahmoud Darwish's *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise: Selected Poems* (2003), Claribel Alegría's *Sorrow* (1999), and Robert Desnos's *Selected Poetry* (with William Kulik, for the Modern English Poetry Series, 1991).

Her fourth book of poems, *Blue Hour*, was released in 2003. Forthcoming books include a memoir, *The Horse on Our Balcony* (2010, HarperCollins), a book of essays (2011, HarperCollins) and a fifth collection of poems, *In the Lateness of the World* (HarperCollins).

Ancapagari

In the morning of the tribe this name Ancapagari was given to these mountains. The name, then alive, spread into the world and never returned. Ancapagari: no foot-step ever spoken, no mule deer killed from its foothold, left for dead. Ancapagari opened the stones. Pine roots gripped peak rock with their claws. Water dug into the earth and vanished, boiling up again in another place. The water was bitten by aspen, generations of aspen shot their light colored trunks into space. Ancapagari. At that time, if the whisper was in your mouth, you were lighted.

Now these people are buried. The root-taking, finished. Buried in everything, thousands taken root. The roots swell, nesting. Openings widen for the roots to surface.

They sway within you in steady wind of your breath. You are forever swinging between this being and another, one being and another. There is a word for it crawling in your mouth each night. Speak it.

Ancapagari has circled, returned to these highlands. The yellow pines deathless, the sparrow hawks scull, the waters are going numb. Ancapagari longs to be spoken in each tongue. It is the name of the god who has come from among us.

Carolyn Forché

Elegy

The page opens to snow on a field: boot-holed month, black hour
the bottle in your coat half voda half winter light.
To what and to whom does one say yes?
If God were the uncertain, would you cling to him?

Beneath a tattoo of stars the gate open, so silent so like a tomb.
This is the city you most loved, an empty stairwell
where the next rain lifts invisibly from the Seine.

With solitude, your coat open, you walk
steadily as if the railings were there and your hands weren't passing
through them.

"When things were ready, they poured on fuel and touched off the fire.
They waited for a high wind. It was very fine, that powdered bone.
It was put into sacks, and when there was enough we went to a bridge
on the Narew River."

And even less explicit phrases survived:

"To make charcoal.

For laundry irons."

And so we revolt against silence with a bit of speaking.

The page is a charred field where the dead would have written

We went on. And it was like living through something again one
could not live through again.

The soul behind you no longer inhabits your life: the unlit house
with its breathless windows and a chimney of ruined wings
where wind becomes an aria, your name, voices from a field,
And you, smoke, dissonance, a psalm, a stairwell.

Anonymous submission.

Carolyn Forché

Kalaloch

The bleached wood massed in bone piles,
we pulled it from dark beach and built
fire in a fenced clearing.

The posts' blunt stubs sank down,
they circled and were roofed by milled
lumber dragged at one time to the coast.
We slept there.

Each morning the minus tide—
weeds flowed it like hair swimming.
The starfish gripped rock, pastel,
rough. Fish bones lay in sun.

Each noon the milk fog sank
from cloud cover, came in
our clothes and held them
tighter on us. Sea stacks
stood and disappeared.
They came back when the sun
scrubbed out the inlet.

We went down to piles to get
mussels, I made my shirt
a bowl of mussel stones, carted
them to our grate where they smoked apart.
I pulled the mussel lip bodies out,
chewed their squeak.
We went up the path for fresh water, berries.
Hardly speaking, thinking.

During low tide we crossed
to the island, climbed
its wet summit. The redfoots
and pelicans dropped for fish.
Oclets so silent fell
toward water with linked feet.

Jacynthe said little.
Long since we had spoken Nova Scotia,

Michigan, and knew beauty in saying nothing.
She told me about her mother
who would come at them with bread knives then
stop herself, her face emptied.

I told her about me,
never lied. At night
at times the moon floated.
We sat with arms tight
watching flames spit, snap.
On stone and sand picking up
wood shaped like a body, like a gull.

I ran barefoot not only
on beach but harsh gravels
up through the woods.
I shit easy, covered my dropping.
Some nights, no fires, we watched
sea pucker and get stabbed
by the beacon
circling on Tatoosh.

2

I stripped and spread
on the sea lip, stretched
to the slap of the foam
and the vast red dulce.
Jacynthe gripped the earth
in her fists, opened—
the boil of the tide
shuffled into her.

The beach revolved,
headlands behind us
put their pines in the sun.
Gulls turned a strong sky.
Their pained wings held,
they bit water quick, lifted.
Their looping eyes continually
measure the distance from us,

bare women who do not touch.

Rocks drowsed, holes
filled with suds from a distance.
A deep laugh bounced in my flesh
and sprayed her.

3

Flies crawled us,
Jacynthe crawled.
With her palms she
spread my calves, she
moved my heels from each other.
A woman's mouth is
not different, sand moved
wild beneath me, her long
hair wiped my legs, with women
there is sucking, the water
slops our bodies. We come
clean, our clits beat like
twins to the loons rising up.

We are awake.
Snails sprinkle our gulps.
Fish die in our grips, there is
sand in the anus of dancing.
Tatoosh Island
hardens in the distance.
We see its empty stones
sticking out of the sea again.
Jacynthe holds tinder
under fire to cook the night's wood.

If we had men I would make
milk in me simply. She is
quiet. I like that you
cover your teeth.

Carolyn Forché

Poem For Maya

Dipping our bread in oil tins
we talked of morning peeling
open our rooms to a moment
of almonds, olives and wind
when we did not yet know what we were.
The days in Mallorca were alike:
footprints down goat-paths
from the beds we had left,
at night the stars locked to darkness.
At that time we were learning
to dance, take our clothes
in our fingers and open
ourselves to their hands.
The veranera was with us.
For a month the almond trees bloomed,
their droppings the delicate silks
we removed when each time a touch
took us closer to the window where
we whispered yes, there on the intricate
balconies of breath, overlooking
the rest of our lives.

Carolyn Forché

Reunion

Just as he changes himself, in the end eternity changes him.

—Mallarmé

On the phonograph, the voice
of a woman already dead for three
decades, singing of a man
who could make her do anything.
On the table, two fragile
glasses of black wine,
a bottle wrapped in its towel.
It is that room, the one
we took in every city, it is
as I remember: the bed, a block
of moonlight and pillows.
My fingernails, pecks of light
on your thighs.
The stink of the fire escape.
The wet butts of cigarettes
you crushed one after another.
How I watched the morning come
as you slept, more my son
than a man ten years older.
How my breasts feel, years
later, the tongues swishing
in my dress, some yours, some
left by other men.
Since then, I have always
wakened first, I have learned
to leave a bed without being
seen and have stood
at the washbasins, wiping oil
and salt from my skin,
staring at the cupped water
in my two hands.
I have kept everything
you whispered to me then.
I can remember it now as I see you
again, how much tenderness we could
wedge between a stairwell
and a police lock, or as it was,

as it still is, in the voice
of a woman singing of a man
who could make her do anything.

Carolyn Forché

Selective Service

We rise from the snow where we've
lain on our backs and flown like children,
from the imprint of perfect wings and cold gowns,
and we stagger together wine-breathed into town
where our people are building
their armies again, short years after
body bags, after burnings. There is a man
I've come to love after thirty, and we have
our rituals of coffee, of airports, regret.
After love we smoke and sleep
with magazines, two shot glasses
and the black and white collapse of hours.
In what time do we live that it is too late
to have children? In what place
that we consider the various ways to leave?
There is no list long enough
for a selective service card shriveling
under a match, the prison that comes of it,
a flag in the wind eaten from its pole
and boys sent back in trash bags.
We'll tell you. You were at that time
learning fractions. We'll tell you
about fractions. Half of us are dead or quiet
or lost. Let them speak for themselves.
We lie down in the fields and leave behind
the corpses of angels.

Carolyn Forché

Sequestered Writing

Horses were turned loose in the child's sorrow. Black and roan, cantering through snow.

The way light fills the hand with light, November with graves, infancy with white. White. Given lilacs, lilacs disappear. Then low voices rising in walls.

The way they withdrew from the child's body and spoke as if it were not there.

What ghost comes to the bedside whispering You?

-- With its no one without its I --

A dwarf ghost? A closet of empty clothes?

Ours was a ghost who stole household goods. Nothing anyone would miss.

Supper plates. Apples. Barbed wire behind the house.

At the end of the hall, it sleepwalks into a mirror wearing mother's robe.

A bedsheet lifts from the bed and hovers. Face with no face. Come here.

The bookcase knows, and also the darkness of books. Long passages into, Endless histories toward, sleeping pages about. Why else toss gloves into a grave?

A language that once sent ravens through firs. The open world from which it came.

Words holding the scent of an asylum fifty years. It is fifty years, then.

The child hears from within: Come here and know, below

And unbeknownst to us, what these fields had been.

Carolyn Forché

Skin Canoes

Swallows carve lake wind,
trailers lined up, fish tins.
The fires of a thousand small camps
spilled on a hillside.

I pull leeks, morels from the soil,
fry chubs from the lake in moonlight.
I hear someone, hear the splash, groan
of a waterpump, wipe my mouth.
Fish grease spits at darkness.

Once I nudged a canoe through that water,
letting its paddle lift, drip.
I was sucked down smaller than the sound
of the dropping, looked out
from where I had vanished.

Carolyn Forché

Taking Off My Clothes

I take off my shirt, I show you.
I shaved the hair out under my arms.
I roll up my pants, I scraped off the hair
on my legs with a knife, getting white.

My hair is the color of chopped maples.
My eyes dark as beans cooked in the south.
(Coal fields in the moon on torn-up hills)

Skin polished as a Ming bowl
showing its blood cracks, its age, I have hundreds
of names for the snow, for this, all of them quiet.

In the night I come to you and it seems a shame
to waste my deepest shudders on a wall of a man.

You recognize strangers,
think you lived through destruction.
You can't explain this night, my face, your memory.

You want to know what I know?
Your own hands are lying.

Carolyn Forché

The Colonel

What you have heard is true. I was in his house. His wife carried a tray of coffee and sugar. His daughter filed her nails, his son went out for the night. There were daily papers, pet dogs, a pistol on the cushion beside him. The moon swung bare on its black cord over the house. On the television was a cop show. It was in English. Broken bottles were embedded in the walls around the house to scoop the kneecaps from a man's legs or cut his hands to lace. On the windows there were gratings like those in liquor stores. We had dinner, rack of lamb, good wine, a gold bell was on the table for calling the maid. The maid brought green mangoes, salt, a type of bread. I was asked how I enjoyed the country. There was a brief commercial in Spanish. His wife took everything away. There was some talk of how difficult it had become to govern. The parrot said hello on the terrace. The colonel told it to shut up, and pushed himself from the table. My friend said to me with his eyes: say nothing. The colonel returned with a sack used to bring groceries home. He spilled many human ears on the table. They were like dried peach halves. There is no other way to say this. He took one of them in his hands, shook it in our faces, dropped it into a water glass. It came alive there. I am tired of fooling around he said. As for the rights of anyone, tell your people they can go f--- themselves. He swept the ears to the floor with his arm and held the last of his wine in the air. Something for your poetry, no? he said. Some of the ears on the floor caught this scrap of his voice. Some of the ears on the floor were pressed to the ground.

May 1978

Carolyn Forché

The Garden Shukkei-En

By way of a vanished bridge we cross this river
as a cloud of lifted snow would ascend a mountain.

She has always been afraid to come here.

It is the river she most
remembers, the living
and the dead both crying for help.

A world that allowed neither tears nor lamentation.

The matsu trees brush her hair as she passes
beneath them, as do the shining strands of barbed wire.

Where this lake is, there was a lake,
where these black pine grow, there grew black pine.

Where there is no teahouse I see a wooden teahouse
and the corpses of those who slept in it.

On the opposite bank of the Ota, a weeping willow
etches its memory of their faces into the water.

Where light touches the face, the character for heart is written.

She strokes a burnt trunk wrapped in straw:
I was weak and my skin hung from my fingertips like cloth

Do you think for a moment we were human beings to them?

She comes to the stone angel holding paper cranes.
Not an angel, but a woman where she once had been,
who walks through the garden Shukkei-en
calling the carp to the surface by clapping her hands.

Do Americans think of us?

So she began as we squatted over the toilets:
If you want, I'll tell you, but nothing I say will be enough.

We tried to dress our burns with vegetable oil.

Her hair is the white froth of rice rising up kettlesides, her mind also.
In the postwar years she thought deeply about how to live.

The common greeting dozo-yiroshku is please take care of me.
All hibakusha still alive were children then.

A cemetery seen from the air is a child's city.

I don't like this particular red flower because
it reminds me of a woman's brain crushed under a roof.

Perhaps my language is too precise, and therefore difficult to understand?

We have not, all these years, felt what you call happiness.
But at times, with good fortune, we experience something close.
As our life resembles life, and this garden the garden.
And in the silence surrounding what happened to us

it is the bell to awaken God that we've heard ringing.

Carolyn Forché

The Ghost of Heaven

Sleep to sleep through thirty years of night,
a child herself with child,
for whom we searched

through here, or there, amidst
bones still sleeved and trousered,
a spine picked clean, a paint can,
a skull with hair

Sewn into the hem of memory:
Fire.
God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,
God not
of philosophers or scholars. God not of poets.

Night to night:
child walking toward me through burning maize
over the clean bones of those whose flesh
was lifted by zopilotes into heaven.

So that is how we ascend!
In the clawed feet of fallen angels.
To be assembled again
in the work rooms of clouds.

She rose from where they found her lying
not far from a water urn, leaving
herself behind on the ground
where they found her, holding her arms
before her as if she were asleep.

That is how she appears to me: a ghost in heaven.
Carrying her arms in her arms.

Blue smoke from corn cribs, flap of wings.

On the walls of the city streets a plague of initials.

Walking through a fire-lit river
to a burning house: dead Singer
sewing machine and piece of dress.

Outside a cashew tree wept
blackened cashews over lamina.

Outside paper fireflies rose to the stars.

Bring penicillin if you can, surgical tape, a whetstone,
mosquito repellent but not the aerosol kind.
Especially bring a syringe for sucking phlegm,
a knife, wooden sticks, a surgical clamp, and plastic bags.

You will need a bottle of cloud
for anesthesia.

Like the flight of a crane
through colorless dreams.

When a leech opens your flesh it leaves a small volcano.
Always pour turpentine over your hair before going to sleep.

Such experiences as these are forgotten
before memory intrudes.

The girl was found (don't say this)
with a man's severed head stuffed
into her where a child would have been.
No one knew who the man was.
Another of the dead.
So they had not, after all,
killed a pregnant girl.
This was a relief to them.

That sound in the brush?
A settling of wind in sorghum.

If they capture you, talk.
Talk. Please yes. You heard me
right the first time.

You will be asked who you are.
Eventually, we are all asked who we are.

All who come
All who come into the world
All who come into the world are sent.
Open your curtain of spirit.

Carolyn Forché

The Memory of Elena

We spend our morning
in the flower stalls counting
the dark tongues of bells
that hang from ropes waiting
for the silence of an hour.
We find a table, ask for paella,
cold soup and wine, where a calm
light trembles years behind us.

In Buenos Aires only three
years ago, it was the last time his hand
slipped into her dress, with pearls
cooling her throat and bells like
these, chipping at the night—

As she talks, the hollow
clopping of a horse, the sound
of bones touched together.
The paella comes, a bed of rice
and camarones, fingers and shells,
the lips of those whose lips
have been removed, mussels
the soft blue of a leg socket.

This is not paella, this is what
has become of those who remained
in Buenos Aires. This is the ring
of a rifle report on the stones,
her hand over her mouth,
her husband falling against her.

These are the flowers we bought
this morning, the dahlias tossed
on his grave and bells
waiting with their tongues cut out
for this particular silence.

Carolyn Forché

The Morning Baking

Grandma, come back, I forgot
How much lard for these rolls

Think you can put yourself in the ground
Like plain potatoes and grow in Ohio?
I am damn sick of getting fat like you

Think you can lie through your Slovak?
Tell filthy stories about the blood sausage?
Pish-pish nights at the virgin in Detroit?

I blame your raising me up for my Slav tongue
You beat me up out back, taught me to dance

I'll tell you I don't remember any kind of bread
Your wavy loaves of flesh
Stink through my sleep
The stars on your silk robes

But I'm glad I'll look when I'm old
Like a gypsy dusha hauling milk

Carolyn Forché

The Testimony Of Light

Our life is a fire dampened, or a fire shut up in stone.

--Jacob Boehme, De Incarnatione Verbi

Outside everything visible and invisible a blazing maple.

Daybreak: a seam at the curve of the world. The trousered legs of the women shimmered.

They held their arms in front of them like ghosts.

The coal bones of the house clinked in a kimono of smoke.

An attention hovered over the dream where the world had been.

For if Hiroshima in the morning, after the bomb has fallen,
is like a dream, one must ask whose dream it is. {1}

Must understand how not to speak would carry it with us.

With bones put into rice bowls.

While the baby crawled over its dead mother seeking milk.

Muga-muchu {2}: without self, without center. Thrown up in the sky by a wind.

The way back is lost, the one obsession.

The worst is over.

The worst is yet to come.

1--...is the question asked by Peter Schwenger in Letter Bomb.

Nuclear Holocaust and the Exploding Word.

2--...is from Robert Jay Lifton's Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima.

Carolyn Forché

The Visitor

In Spanish he whispers there is no time left.
It is the sound of scythes arcing in wheat,
the ache of some field song in Salvador.
The wind along the prison, cautious
as Francisco's hands on the inside, touching
the walls as he walks, it is his wife's breath
slipping into his cell each night while he
imagines his hand to be hers. It is a small country.

There is nothing one man will not do to another.

Carolyn Forché

Travel Papers

Au silence de celle qui laisse rêveur.
—René Char

By boat to Seurasaari where
the small fish were called vendace.
A man blew a horn of birchwood
toward the nightless sea.

Still voice. Fire that is no fire.
Ahead years unknown to be lived—

Bells from the tower in the all-at-once, then
one by one, hours. Outside
(so fleetingly) ourselves—

In a still mirror, in a blue within
where this earthly journey dreaming
itself begins,

thought into being from the hidden to the end of the visible.

Mountains before and behind,
heather and lichen, yarrow, gorse,
then a sea village of chartreuse fronds.

Spent fuel, burnt
wind, mute swans.

We drove the birch-lined
highway from Dresden
to Berlin behind armored
cars in late afternoon,
nineteenth of June, passing
the black cloud of a freight

truck from Budapest.

Through disappearing
villages, past horses grazing vanished fields.

The year before you died, America
went to war again on the other
side of the world.

This is how the earth becomes,
you said, a grotto of skeletons.

In the ruins of a station: a soaked
bed, broken chairs, a dead coal stove.

White weather, chalk and basalt,
puffins, fuchsia and history shot
through with particles
of recognition: this one
wetted down with petrol then
set alight, that one taking
forty rounds, this other
found eleven years later in a bog.

In the station house, imaginary
maps, smoke chased by wind, a registry
of arrivals, the logs of ghost
ships and a few prison
diaries written on tissue paper.

Do you remember the blue-leaved lilies?
The grotto, the hoarfrost, the frieze?

Through the casements of glass hand-blown

before the war, a birch tree lets snow drop
through its limbs onto other birches. Birch twigs
in wind through glass.

Who were we then? Such
a laughter as morning peeled
its light from us!

You said the cemeteries were full in a voice
like wind plaiting willows—fields in bloom
but silent without grasshoppers or bees.
What do you want then? You with your

neverness, your unknown,
your book of things, you
with once years ahead to be lived.

Your father believes he took you
with him, that you are
in an urn beside your sleeping mother
but I am still writing with your hand,
as you stand in your still-there of lighted words.

Such is the piano's sadness and the rifle's moonlight.
Stairwells remember as do doors, but windows do not—

do not, upon waking, gaze out a window
if you wish to remember your dream

An ache of hope that you will come back—

the cawing flock is not your coming.

Did you float toward Salzburg? A wind
in the mustard fields?—or walk instead
beside me through the asylum in Krakow?
Hours after your death you seemed
everywhere at once like the swifts at twilight.
Now your moments are clouds
in a photograph of swifts.

In the hour held
open between day and night under
the meteor showers of Perseid
we held each other for the last time.

Dead, you whispered where is the road?

There, through the last of the sentences, just there—
through the last of the sentences, the road—

Carolyn Forché